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 HD **As B.C. wildfires rage, curators are forced to make hard decisions**
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It was a chaotic Monday on the job for Jeremiah Ryder and his team of two. As ash fell onto the Westbank Museum in West Kelowna, B.C., and water bombers swooped down into Okanagan Lake, the small group inside the building had to take stock: reviewing which artifacts they would rescue first, in the event that a nearby wildfire overtook their area.

"The fire ... is only a couple of kilometres from the museum right now," said Mr. Ryder, the executive director, late that afternoon.

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Previously planned fire-protective landscaping was under way outside - they're replacing non-native species with drought-resistant plants. Inside, the phone was ringing all day, as tourists - the museum also functions as West Kelowna's Visitor Centre - asked questions such as how to get around with highways closed owing to wildfires. And in between calls, there were serious discussions: what to save, what to leave.

One of the top items on the list of artifacts to rescue: a bible, several hundred years old.

Regrettably not on the list: what Mr. Ryder described as one of the three smallest operating sawmills on the planet.

"I can't take that out of the museum because it's 16 feet long," he said. "There's not enough manpower, there's not enough help. There's not enough places to put all the stuff."

It's a tiny community museum that collects and displays artifacts from the area. Established in 1978 by a local couple as a retirement project on their own property, the museum moved to the old RCMP building in downtown Westbank in 2011.

Questions they asked themselves as they drew up the list: What is irreplaceable? What would insurance cover? What will fit into fire-safe bins? Or into the other storage containers they have, whose fireproofing ability is, as Mr. Ryder put it, "TBD?" "At the end of the day, there's a lot of stuff that we're just going to have to hope for. And that's tragic."

Ryder brought home the museum's chequebooks and other paperwork. The plan, should need be, was for the precious artifacts to go to homes of employees or board members - as long as those homes were far enough away that they were not in a fire zone, not at risk of an evacuation alert or order. At least, not yet.

This feels like the summer when the climate emergency has come calling. More than 250 wildfires were burning across B.C. as of last Thursday night - as well as untold others in many other parts of the country, and world.

And this month, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a dire report: a code red for humanity owing to climate change, which has implications for everyone, including museums and art galleries.

"With the recent UN report, it's undeniable that these natural disasters are only going to be more common moving forward," says Ryan Hunt, executive director of the BC Museums Association. He points out that there is no national or provincial strategy officially in place in the case of widespread collections emergencies. And he is urging action. "The time is now to be having these conversations, because we don't know what next summer is going to hold, we don't know what next winter is going to hold."

Climate change is exacerbating many of the already clear and present dangers to cultural institutions. Risk management is crucial for any museum or gallery, to protect items from what's commonly known as the 10 Agents of Deterioration. These include fire, water, physical forces (including earthquakes), temperature, humidity and pests.

"With the increasing frequency and intensity of wildfires (not to mention hurricanes and other natural disasters), it is becoming imperative, more than ever before, for museums to have an updated, comprehensive disaster preparedness and emergency response plan to help ensure the safety of their staff, minimize risk, and preserve their structures and facilities," declared the Western Museums Association in a statement on its website after fire ripped through Lytton, B.C. this summer, destroying most of the town, including the Lytton Museum and Archives and the Chinese History Museum.

In Ottawa, the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) has added climate change to its Framework for Preserving Heritage Collections - a key resource for museums and galleries.

"This year, suddenly climate change is a very real thing," says Heidi Swierenga, senior conservator at UBC's Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver and head of the Collections Care and Access Department.

"We're seeing the complete devastation of entire communities and institutions, and as soon as people see that, all of a sudden, it's real.

"And it has to become part of the institutions' mandate to plan for it."

Ms. Swierenga is one of the founders of the British Columbia Heritage Emergency Response Network. BC HERN is a consortium of art, culture and heritage workers "who feel morally and professionally obliged" to plan for emergency situations and support other cultural institutions in such an event.

The initiative was created amid a growing risk to collections owing to climate change. In search of the positive, Ms. Swierenga hopes disaster preparedness will become a priority with the climate emergency.

"It's always the thing that's easy to fall off the table because there are so many other priorities and these institutions are usually working with skeletal staff. They're non-profits with minimal staffing ... just trying to keep the business running."

Often, smaller museums are more at risk - without the infrastructure or staff to help in an emergency. The Westbank Museum was safe last week, thanks to shifts in the winds and changes in weather.

But who knows what's ahead? With a group like BC HERN, processes are put in place so larger institutions can help, and not in an ad hoc manner each time. Because there are going to be more.

FIRE The devastating effects of fire were on full display in Rio de Janeiro in 2018, with the destruction of Brazil's National Museum and its collections - including Indigenous artifacts from Canada's Northwest Coast. When the California wildfires came threateningly close to the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles in 2019, the museum closed - but the collections were safe inside; the facility was built to withstand fires.

The way a museum or storage facility is designed and constructed can help protect against dangers now made worse by climate change. In 1997, the Canadian Museum of Nature opened a new facility in Gatineau for storage and administration built to safeguard its collections from disasters such as fires, flooding and pests - top-priority concerns for museums, even before climate change became evident in everyday life. Known as the Natural Heritage Campus, the Gatineau structure has a firewall around the facility and each collection area functions independently, separated by firewalls. Around the main facility is what's known as the Dynamic Buffer Zone, which helps with environmental control and pest management. In an interview, collection services and information management head Sean Tudor compared the design to a Kinder Egg, or nesting dolls.

Buildings within buildings, he said.

The facility is seen as a model when it comes to building a structure to withstand natural threats. It was one of the places that Parks Canada toured as it planned its new state-of-the-art-of-protection storage facility, under construction in Gatineau.

Best practices when it comes to damage prevention and preparedness also include communication strategies. Fire plans are communicated to key staff - and local first responders. At the Museum of Nature, for example, they're alerted to which departments have radioactive material.

To prepare for a worst-case scenario, many institutions draw up priority lists: what should be rescued first from a catastrophe - or salvaged, when it's safe. These lists can be shared with first responders when it's safe for them to go inside - generally, before staff can be let back in. At the Kelowna Museums, for instance, priority items are marked with tags and notices on the shelves.

"Things that are of intense heritage value or things that are extremely costly or impossible to replace," curator of collections Nikki Bose says. They include rare bird eggs and early Boy Scout uniforms. Items on loan from other institutions are also high on the priority list for rescuing. During a flooding scare a few years ago, Ms. Bose took items home, to higher ground, to keep them safe. But this practice - even if it's the only option - raises other concerns: What if that person's home is evacuated?

What happens if the item is damaged or destroyed in an attempt to save it? How do you track these artifacts?

Digitization of museum collections is impor-

tant. In the case of Lytton's Chinese History Museum, for example, many of the destroyed artifacts exist in digital form, notes Rebecca MacKenzie with the Canadian Museums Association. "It can prove a great starting point for rebuilding a physical collection as well as a learning tool."

WATER Plumbing is important - very important - when it comes to cultural collections. A burst pipe or a misfire of the gallery's sprinkler system can be devastating. Museums can mitigate this concern with architectural choices. At the Museum of Nature, for instance, water lines for the labs don't travel over the collection spaces, but over the main corridor.

In 2013, many of Alberta's cultural institutions experienced the devastating impact of severe flooding. High River's Museum of the Highwood lost about 80 per cent of its collection; Calgary's National Music Centre's collection loss was around \$2.5-million (the NMC has since moved to a larger, safer, purpose-built building).

The Glenbow Museum in Calgary sent conservators to what is now the arts hub cSPACE, where affected galleries could bring artwork to see if it could be restored. "It was kind of like a refugee camp for impacted art," says the Glenbow's collections manager, Daryl Betenia. "We did a fair bit of triage and offered advice."

The flood waters never reached the Glenbow that terrible June, but even if they had, Ms. Betenia notes that its collections are stored relatively high up in the building, beginning on the fifth floor. "So that would have saved us," she says. Acknowledging that it's not always an option for museums and galleries, Ms. Betenia says one thing the experience "absolutely validated" is that basements and ground floors should not be used as storage areas.

"There's just too much risk."

Building a new structure allows for consideration of these things from the ground up. Parks Canada's new Gatineau facility will consolidate collections from five places across the country - everything from 10,000-year-old Indigenous artifacts to 16th- and 17th-century colonial ceramics to poet Robert Service's

typewriter and Mackenzie King's crystal ball. The double-walled structure - built on a single floor - will include dry ponds to help capture water in case of flooding. And large waterholding tanks for fire suppression.

"It's a responsibility to care for these items on behalf of Canadians," says TJ Hammer, director of collections, curatorial and conservation. "It's a serious endeavour."

EARTHQUAKES At the Museum of Anthropology on the UBC campus in Vancouver, the totem poles and other carvings have been removed from the Great Hall; visitors can see some of them lying on their side in an adjacent gallery as the museum conducts major seismic upgrades.

Earthquakes are of significant concern on the West Coast - and in other parts of Canada that are on fault lines. Simple strategies include the seemingly obvious, such as building shelves with lips, to minimize items falling to the ground.

At MOA, a study commissioned in 2014 found that its Great Hall was seismically vulnerable and required rebuilding.

The overhaul is happening now, using a technology known as base isolation. The Arthur Erickson building will be deconstructed and reconstructed, with base isolators - structural elements meant to absorb the impact of any seismic activity - placed under the main floor slab. "It's like putting big shock absorbers underneath the Great Hall to take the impact of an earthquake, if one should ever happen," MOA associate director Moya Waters says.

The Great Hall is closed for the duration. When asked what it will look like when it reopens, Ms. Waters said it will replicate the current space. "The goal is to make it look like nothing had ever happened."

As climate change fuels concerns around catastrophes at cultural institutions, Ms. Swierenga is calling for more co-ordination and stable funding for groups such as BC HERN. In 2017, the group signed a statement of co-operation with other institutions, including MOA, the RBCM and the Vancouver Art Gallery.

"I think it is an incomprehensible situation that there is currently no national or provincial strategy for the salvage of collections. Salvage or preparedness," says Ms. Swierenga. She says that while CCI is an important resource, it is centralized in Ottawa and not always positioned to support the entire country. "This is why the development of the network is needed and why people have been working off the sides of their desk to create a model that will fill the void." She says she is hopeful that longterm funding will become available to support this work.

Mr. Hunt, at the BCMA, worries that for museums already dealing with the devastation of the pandemic, even mild damage from wildfires or flooding could lead to closings across the province.

He points out that if a museum has already gone through emergency reserves, even minor smoke or flood damage with a bill of, say, \$10,000, could be catastrophic.

"That \$10,000 can then trigger a cascade of events that ends up with museums having to close down. So, with the ever-increasing certainty of climate-related natural disasters, on top of an already precarious sector, I do see a scenario in which even relatively minor disasters - let alone catastrophic disasters like we've seen this summer - could trigger massive sector-wide closures."

Galleries and institutions have a role to play in the climate crisis that goes beyond protecting their collections: They can help galvanize the public with exhibitions, education - and outreach.

"Museums are one of the most trusted institutions in our society. We have a voice and people listen," wrote the BC Museums Association on its website after the release of the devastating report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

"Through our exhibits and programming, we can help communities better understand the threat posed by climate change. We can equip communities with actions they can take as individuals to make a difference."

They can also lead by example. In the United States, the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation has created a Climate Initiative to advance the goal of carbon neutrality in the visual arts. Nearly 80 collecting institutions received more than US\$5-million in the inaugural grant cycle this year.

In Canada, Robert R. Janes, founder of the Coalition of Museums for Climate Justice, says museums must reduce their consumption and footprint and start the conversation with their communities - and adds this isn't happening much in this country.

In February, he issued an open letter to Canadian museums and gallery directors, saying that cultural institutions are uniquely qualified to help mitigate the climate crisis. He has now started using the term "climate chaos," saying things have escalated from a crisis.

"It is time to honour the public trust that museums have been gifted," wrote Dr. Janes, who is based in Canmore, Alberta.

"What are we waiting for?"

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